

POLITICS & SOCIETY DISPATCHES

New Democratic Party leader Tom Perez has deep Jesuit connections

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Speaking in a downtown Chicago club last June, Tom Perez, who on Saturday was elected to lead the Democratic Party, said that he grew up in “a Matthew 25 family.”

“My folks taught us that if someone is hungry, you feed them. That if someone is thirsty, you give them drink. If someone is a stranger you welcome them into your home,” he said, invoking the passage from the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus tells his followers that how they treat those in need will serve as the test during the final judgment.

Mr. Perez, who takes over as head of the Democrats during a particularly challenging period for the party, said Jesuit values have animated his career, which includes stints in two Democratic presidential administrations.

“The Jesuits have always been practitioners of that notion that we will never be silent in the face of injustice, we will never be silent in the face of attacks on religious liberty and we will never be silent in the face of economic inequality,” he said in his speech to the Jesuit Alumni and Friends of Chicago.

“A rising tide must lift all boats. That’s what Matthew 25 teaches us,” he said. “It can’t just lift the yachts.”

Mr. Perez, the son of Dominican immigrants who was the Secretary of Labor and an assistant attorney general focusing on civil rights issues in the Obama White House, has deep Jesuit connections.

He graduated from the Jesuit-run Canisius High School in Buffalo and would go on to meet his future wife, Ann Marie Staudenmaier, when she was part of the Jesuit Volunteer Corp in Buffalo in the 1980s. They attended a Jesuit-run parish in Washington, D.C., and he has spoken at high-profile Jesuit gatherings in recent years.

Mr. Perez holds up as one of his role models the late Horace B. McKenna, S.J., who in addition to his work as a civil rights and social justice activist, was also the pastor at the Jesuit parish in Washington Mr. Perez and his family attended before it was shut down in 2012. “Look him up, he’s going to be a saint some day,” Mr. Perez said in his Chicago speech.

His Jesuit connections were highlighted at Mr. Perez’s 2013 confirmation hearing as secretary of labor.

During the hearing, Mr. Perez brought up his wife's volunteering with the Jesuits to Senator Bob Casey, an alumnus of the same volunteer program.

In response, the committee chairman, Senator Tom Harkin, cracked "an inside joke" about the Jesuits: "I have been in Catholic schools all of my life. I always say I was very fortunate. I never had Jesuit teachers."

The exchange prompted Mr. Perez to note that his wife has an uncle who is a Jesuit priest, John M. Staudenmaier, who works in the mission and identity office at the University of Detroit Mercy.

"Oh, well. They're great people, those Jesuits," Mr. Harkin said in reply. Mr. Perez responded simply, "Yes."

Father Staudenmaier told **America** that he has known Mr. Perez since the 1980s and that they speak about Jesuit spirituality. He said Mr. Perez's Jesuit connection is most evident in how he makes big decisions.

"He considers his options in a very Jesuit way," he said. "That's the key to understanding the influence of Jesuit prayer, how you make decisions about your place in the world and where those decisions will place you."

In the weeks leading up to Saturday's vote for party chairman, some Democrats expressed frustration with Mr. Perez's candidacy, saying that he represented the establishment wing of the party and that he does not have enough political experience for the job.

They wanted instead Keith Ellison, a Minnesota congressman endorsed for the post by Senator Bernie Sanders. Mr. Perez won on the second round of voting, and he immediately named Mr. Ellison his deputy.

As head of the party, Mr. Perez will fulfill a role similar to that of a C.E.O., working to advance the agendas of elected officials and helping to rebuild the party at the state level. An early supporter of Hillary Clinton during last year's campaign, Mr. Perez will almost certainly continue attacking President Donald J. Trump.

That is where his appeals to values derived from his faith may be most visible, particularly as Mr. Trump pursues immigration and refugee policies that his critics say unfairly target Muslims.

For example, during his speech in Chicago, Mr. Perez spoke several times about the importance of religious liberty in the United States, pointing to the rights of Muslims in the United States.

"We have to be mindful of the fact that religious liberty is one of our founding principles," he said. "Our faith calls us to remember, and our fabric as Americans calls us to remember, that we all succeed when we embrace religious liberty."

He recalled a community of Muslims in Murfreesboro, Tenn., who faced resistance when they tried to build a new mosque in 2010. Mr. Perez's office in the Department of Justice filed a suit in federal court on behalf of the faith community.

On hand when the Islamic Center of Murfreesboro opened its doors in 2012, Mr. Perez said the United States is "a nation of great principles of religious freedom."

"But as the history of religious discrimination against Jews, Catholics and Mormons, among others, demonstrates, it can be a difficult path along the way," he continued.

Mr. Perez has also said that hostility against Catholics in the 19th and 20th centuries is analogous to what Muslims face today.

"The faith changes but the narrative that rears its ugly head tends to persist," he said in Chicago last summer. "It's a narrative of intolerance."

Testifying before a Senate subcommittee in 2011 about how the Department of Justice was protecting the rights of Muslims living in the United States, he made the same comparison.

"A century ago, being Catholic, my own faith, gave rise to attack in much the same way that being Muslim does today," he said. "Many said at the time that you could not be a good American and a good Catholic."

During his tenure as head of the Labor Department, Mr. Perez championed the so-called Fight for Fifteen, an effort at raising the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, and he negotiated with business leaders on overhauling the nation's overtime pay.

His faith has driven his fight for those kinds of policies, Mr. Perez said in Chicago.

“For me, the intersection of labor rights and civil rights has been remarkable, and it's been such a privilege to do all of this,” he said. “And it's so frequently informed by my faith.”

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